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The real university

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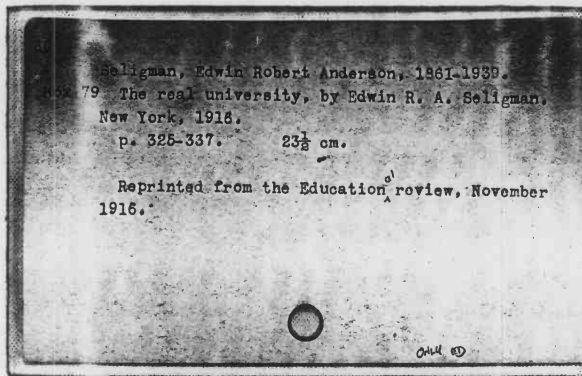
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The Real University

BY
EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN

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I

THE REAL UNIVERSITY¹

My hope, today, is to portray, if I can, the characteristics of the real university—to set free the elusive spirit which is still held captive and struggling to express itself. The explanation must be true not only historically of Athens and Alexandria, Rome and Berytus, Salerno and Bologna, but actually of Berlin and Oxford, St. Andrews and Paris, Harvard and Columbia.

Let us scrutinize the usual shibboleths. We are told first that the object of the university is to diffuse knowledge. But the secondary and the high schools do the same. The university is not simply higher, it is different. The second explanation, advanced especially in our country, where the so-called university is often a congeries of technical schools held loosely together by an insignificant college of liberal arts, is that the university is designed to give professional training and to prepare students for the activity of work-a-day life. But surely proprietary medical schools or independent business institutes, multiplied even to the nth degree, can not constitute a university. Something else must be injected into them before the metamorphosis is complete. The most common contention, again, is that the function of the university is to promote science. But this also is clearly defective. It is not true historically. It, would indeed, be venturesome to assert that the trivium

¹ An address at the opening of the 163rd year of Columbia University, September 27, 1916.

or the quadrivium, with their meticulous distinctions and hair-splitting disputations, represented the pursuit of science. Neither scholasticism nor humanism, but the learned societies of the seventeenth century, mark the beginnings of science. Secondly, the pursuit of science is not confined to the university. The Rockefeller and Carnegie Institutes promote science, but are obviously not universities. Furthermore, to accept the promotion of science as the criterion of the university would be to exclude the very professional schools of which we have just spoken. The older institutions still practise this exclusion, but only in part. Who will say today that the training of the lawyer, the physician and the chemist—included even in Berlin—is any more important than that of the engineer, the architect or the teacher? What is the distinction today between the learned and unlearned professions? To exclude from the university the training for the newer professions is a confession of belated medievalism. But if the professional school, which is supposed to inculcate art rather than science, is rightfully a part of the university, how can we assert that the university stands only for science? And lastly, do not the fine arts actually find a growing lodgment within the university? Are not music and painting and poetry and even sculpture coming to form an integral part of the curriculum? But surely art is not science. Thus from every point of view the promotion of science, deeply as it may enlist our enthusiasm, does not and can not constitute the distinctive purpose of the university. But if, then, neither the diffusion of knowledge, nor professional training, nor the pursuit of science is the real spirit of the university, what is, and how shall we find it?

Perhaps we can reach our answer in a roundabout way. The three great social institutions that have been developed by mankind, in the attempt to achieve the harmony of life, are the state, the church and the university. The state stands for the principle of order; its contribution to social harmony consists in the promotion of group welfare by the associated effort which we call political action. Whatever be our differences as to the exact metaphysical concep-

tion of the state, whether we ascribe to it merely the night-watchman function or the more positive duty of constructive achievement, no thinker will deny that the state stands for compulsion or enforced order.

The contribution of the church to social progress is the endeavor to achieve the spiritual unity and the internal harmony of the individual. To many, indeed, especially in this audience, the only church is the laboratory; the only religion is science. But in the ripe judgment of what is now again perhaps a growing class we need something more than science to give us the glow of ethical fervor. Science may enable us to ascertain the truth; we need something else, call it what you will, to urge us to the right. Science may give us the criterion; the right kind of religion strengthens the motive. Purge it of its dross, liberate it from its superstitions and excrescences, there still remains something which alone can satisfy the craving for spiritual unity and feed the hungry soul.

In contrast to both of these stands the university. Its contribution to social progress may be summarized as the endeavor to promote and to impart intellectual freedom. The function of the state is to supplement the individual; the function of the church is to moralize the individual; the function of the university is to emancipate the individual. The state stands for order; the university for freedom. The church seeks for spiritual truth; the university for intellectual truth. The state stands for power; the church stands for unity; the university stands for independence. The state is the orderer; the church is the harmonizer; the university is the emancipator.

In what sense, however, is this emancipation to be understood? First, I should say emancipation from the thralldom of nature. Intellectual freedom means liberation from superstition and all the primitive manifestations of mental enslavement. The university achieves the victory of mind over matter, of man over nature. Second, I should put mastery over one's self. To secure this mastery we need to strike off the fetters of prejudice, the bonds of

convention, and above all the shackles of sentiment. Civilization means the control of the impulses by the intellect: without the fire of perfect freedom the rough ore of human nature will not be transmitted into the pure gold of human possibilities. The university, thru the liberation of the intellect, is humanizing mankind. Thirdly, the university stands for accomplishment. We need to do more than the mere routinier or the narrow specialist. The real expert must have a broad basis and a wide vision, with the creative capacity. The real expert is the surgeon who performs a new operation, the architect-engineer who builds the first skyscraper, the lawyer who distills from the books and the cases a new and illuminating principle. To produce this type of men we need the inquisitive, the imaginative spirit, which is the concomitant of true emancipation. Finally, the fourth aspect of intellectual freedom is the courage which it implants in the struggle for social and political justice. The spirit of social unrest is to some a hydra-headed monster or Frankenstein; to others, the angel with the flaming sword. What greater role for the university than to help mold public sentiment, to penetrate the hard crust of convention and tradition with the fertile showers of a free spirit, or to temper the impetuosity of impulse with the ripe wisdom of the emancipated intellect.

The old antinomies and shibboleths are thus largely fallacious. In lieu of the contrast between the scientific and the professional, the abstract and the concrete, the pure and the applied, the ideal and the utilitarian, the theoretical and the practical, we must put the new contrast between the progressive and the traditional, the adventurous and the routine-like, the creative and the receptive. The time always comes when we must cast off our moorings and embark on the stormy sea of the unknown. Without the stout craft of experience, without the rudder and compass of reliance on the best judgments of the past, the adventure may be hazardous. But unless we keep the prow pointed forward, and resolutely press on despite wind and wave,

we shall never make the distant port or conquer the promised land.

If, then, the spirit of the real university is to promote and to impart intellectual freedom, we must be careful not to separate the two sides. The promotion of intellectual freedom connotes research; the imparting of intellectual freedom implies teaching. There can be no true university without both. Research may be found in the learned society or in the scientific institute; teaching can be carried on in the proprietary school. The university is neither the one nor the other, but by the reaction of research and teaching upon each other transforms both into a higher and unique compound, precious to instructor and student alike. For the former needs the enthusiastic and eager student to spur him on and to replenish his creative energy; while the latter needs the inspiration both of method and of personality. The true university is the one wherein, by this process of mutual reaction, intellectual freedom is promoted among the instructors and imparted to the students.

The obstacles and dangers to this university spirit may be clast as external and internal. The external perils are, today, the political and the economic conditions. Passing strange as it may seem, the university spirit is jeopardized by democracy, no less than by autocracy. For democracy levels down as well as up, and is proverbially intolerant of the expert. The concentrated and overwhelming public opinion that is so characteristic of the modern community is at once the chief safeguard of the democracy and the chief menace to the real liberty of the individual. Fanaticism becomes no less relentless or dangerous because it assumes a political rather than a theological garb. In the autocracy all are subject to the tyranny of the ruler; in the democracy all are likely to be subject to the tyranny of public opinion. The true university must afford an inviolable refuge from each.

Just as the political environment sometimes creates intolerance or repression, so the economic environment

occasionally engenders contempt or suspicion. In a youthful community, especially where the parsimony of nature invites unremitting toil, each self-appointed empire-builder is apt to regard the university with scarcely veiled contempt. And when the backwoods society has given way to the complexity of modern industrial life, the differentiation of economic classes inevitably leads to a divergence of interests which is reflected in the university all the more strongly as the university itself expands its scope and multiplies its activities. Instead of the thinly veiled contempt of the early period the university spirit has now to guard itself against the mutual suspicions engendered by the economic antagonisms of a highly developed industrial society.

The internal perils I should characterize as the college and the professional school. The college is indeed a part of the university, but only in the sense of being a threshold to the university. It has played a distinguished role in our development and is, perhaps, destined to retain that role. But no greater mistake could be made than to attempt to convert the college into the university by applying to it university principles. The university stands for intellectual freedom, for self-reliance, for rigorous method; the college stands for general mental discipline and for a liberal outlook on life. We must not confound them as to student body, as to method, as to instructors. There is, indeed, not the slightest need for conflict. On the contrary, there should be the fullest cooperation and mutual respect. But the college which forms a part of the university must be radically different from the independent or small college. It can not remain alone and apart. It must not limit its horizon to the purely parochial view. If it is primarily the approach to the university, it must fit into the university structure and not be permitted to dominate that structure. It must be animated in its every act by a finer and larger loyalty to the whole institution of which it forms a notable part. The real university can never emerge from the left-overs of the college. A great

college is compatible with a great university; but if we regard first the college and then only the university, we may, indeed, have a great college, but we are sure to have an insignificant university.

Perhaps more important, however, is the menace of the unregenerate professional school. If what has been said above is true, the university must train not alone the doctor and the lawyer, but the members of the other professions as well. The imperious demand of the modern community that the university shall render public service and shall be in close touch with every phase of instructed social activity, is clearly irresistible. But to justify the inclusion of all these schools in the university we must insist on their breathing the spirit of the university, which, as we have seen, comprises research as well as teaching. The narrow professional training can not produce the intellectual emancipation for which alone the university stands. He, therefore, misinterprets the university who thinks that the object of the law school is simply to turn out a good lawyer, of the medical school to produce a good practitioner, of the engineering school to create a good engineer. The true university law school must be, as well, a school of jurisprudence; the medical school must train the future discoverer of new truth; the engineering school must develop the creative expert. As Lord Verulam told us long ago: "If any man thinks philosophy and universality to be idle studies he doth not consider that all professions are from thence served and supplied."

The university spirit, therefore, demands with inexorable logic that every professor in the professional school should have made, and should be making, positive contributions to the subject which he professes. That he should be a good teacher, able to impart the correct method, goes without saying; but that he should possess the creative spirit is equally imperative. The true university should have no room in its law faculty for the so-called leading lawyer, in its medical school for the successful physician who is adding nothing to medical science, in its

engineering or other professional school for the busy practitioner who is doing, perhaps a little better, what everyone else does. In the true university, research is no less important in the professional schools than in the non-professional faculties. When the law school becomes also a real school of jurisprudence, when the medical school is regarded as the home of medical science, and when the other professional schools concern themselves with deepening and broadening the bases of their respective disciplines, then for the first time will the professional student realize what intellectual freedom means, then will the university no longer be menaced by unregenerate utilitarianism, then will the traditional opposition between the old faculties and the new disciplines fade away, then will every part of the institution be united by the same bond and animated by the same spirit. Then, in short, will emerge the real university.

If, now, we turn from the spirit to the form of the true university, we are opening a huge volume of which there is time to turn only a few pages. The four characteristic institutions of the American university are, respectively, the trustees, the president, the faculty and the student body. With respect to each of these there has recently been much discussion and not a little criticism—symptoms of the healthy discontent which is the first condition of progress.

The simplest problem is that of the student body. The true university will seek not for numbers, but for quality; it will give its students the fullest freedom of action and will seek to reduce the red tape of supervision to the smallest possible minimum. It will distinguish sharply between the collegian and the university student at a point not yet definitely settled but which is in process of being reached. And, notwithstanding the delightful essay of William James on the Ph.D. octopus, it will continue to regard the doctor's dissertation, however inadequate, as a precious thing. For, altho not all Ph.D.'s. can be great thinkers, yet the doctor's dissertation, like the masterpiece in the medieval guilds, is an indication, however imperfect, of the mastery that has been achieved in method, and of the glimpse

that has been obtained of the serene and lofty heights of unfettered thought and of creative power. But, on the other hand, the student also must learn to develop the spirit of self-reliance; to remember that the time has come for independent achievement; and to feel, on crossing the portals of the university, some of that sacred awe experienced by the devout worshipper on entering a noble cathedral.

And secondly, the faculty. Faculty originally denoted the power of accomplishment. The faculties of the university were, and still are, its real power of accomplishment; and in that sense the faculties are the university. Historically, indeed, the universities were sometimes guilds of students as well as of instructors; and not infrequently were the professors ingloriously subject to the control of their auditors. But despite this, it was even then the faculties that actually constituted the university.

But if the faculties really constitute the university, we must be careful not to have the wrong kind of faculties. If the true university is the embodiment of freedom, it goes without saying that the professors must be free: free to think, free to express their thoughts, free from crushing administrative duties, free from unduly long hours, free from financial embarrassment, free to elect their representatives, free to share in the choice of their successors or departmental colleagues. To be worthy of this freedom, however, is the indispensable correlative. The freedom to express their thoughts, especially in extramural utterances on hotly controverted questions of policy, must be tempered by the feeling that they can truly represent their institution only by bearing the torch of emancipation—emancipation from prejudiced thinking and from the extremes of comfortable obscurantism or callow radicalism; that they never can truly represent it by indulging in the cheap enthusiasms of intemperate partisanship. Freedom from administrative or scholastic duties must not be utilized as so much leisure to enter into more or less dubious outside lucrative pursuits, oblivious of their higher duties to the

jealous mistress, science. Freedom from financial worry must not be employed for vegetation or for peaceful browsing on fields which ought to be their avocations. And finally, freedom to elect their successors must not be abused by the unworthy motives of nepotism, of social cliquism, of inbreeding, or of fear of being overshadowed. When these obligations are thoroly realized, and not till then, will all the faculties be the embodiment of the real university.

The president is the product of a peculiar development, unknown elsewhere in the world. Unlike the medieval rector, he is not elected by the students; unlike the modern rector, he is not elected by the faculties. He is a survival from the early American college where some permanent head was needed to select and to control the schoolmasters and to discipline the students. His lot, today, is not entirely enviable—for he has to mediate between the trustees, the faculty, the students, the graduates, the benefactors and the general public, each not infrequently with divergent views. To those, however, who would incontinently abandon the presidential office as incompatible with the true university the following observations are pertinent. Even in the continental universities of Europe the minister of education, or his delegate, performs not a few of the functions of the American president. Secondly, it is doubtful whether the rapidly proceeding metamorphosis of the primitive college into the great university does not require a policy and an organization of greater permanence than can, in all likelihood, be secured by the shifting representation of a perpetually changing faculty. Thirdly, autocracy never gives way to democracy by any such sudden jump. Just as in the political life of Great Britain we find the four stages of absolutism, constitutional monarchy, aristocratic republic and the still inchoate radical democracy, so in our university life the Anglo-Saxon idea of progress can be realized only by a gradual transformation of the office and the function of the university president. We can already now discern the outlines of the inevitable transition. The president will be a scholar, endowed with tact and ad-

ministrative skill. He will treat the members of the educational staff as his colleagues and will endeavor to voice their collective judgment. He will avoid the mistake of confusing the true university spirit with mere administrative efficiency, and will insist upon each faculty having a voice in the selection of its dean. He will see to it that mere machinery is subordinated to scholarship, and that the substantial university rewards of both emolument and position go, primarily, to those thinkers who have shed lustre upon the institution. He will protect himself against the occasional incompetence or shortsightedness of the departments, divisions, or even schools by subjecting their recommendations for appointment or promotion to a body of impartial scholars who have shown by accomplishment their devotion to the university ideal and who will thus be able to hasten the transition of our present amorphous institutions into true universities. If the president does all these things, he will probably remain for some time to come the head of that aristocratic republic, which will deserve to become a real democracy only when the ideals of the true university animate every instructor and every student.

Finally, the trustees, that still more unique product of American life. To the trustees is delegated, primarily, the financial responsibility for the university. And while we must not forget that the faculties of the medieval university attended successfully to all their financial concerns, it remains none the less true that the American trustees represent, in this respect, the activity of the government officials in Europe. Moreover, not to speak of the *Reformatores studii* in the Italian universities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we find boards of trustees in the newer continental institutions—scientific and professional—which are not yet incorporated into the universities or which are not under the immediate supervision of the government.

We must indeed not forget that the trustees of the American universities are for the most part intelligent and

hard-working supporters of the institution, whose devotion in many ways lightens the deliberative duties of the instructors. But if the trustees of what was formerly the small college are to remain in charge of the great university, they like the president, like the faculties, like the students must learn, as they are fast learning, to represent the true university ideal. They must learn that the professors are not employés, that academic freedom must be unrestricted, that academic tenure must be permanent, and that in the rare cases when it may seem necessary to scrutinize the utterances or the actions of an instructor, not they but his colleagues, within and perhaps without the particular university, form the only proper and safe medium of investigation. They must learn to be on their guard against introducing into the university the methods or the spirit of the outside activities of which they are, perhaps, eminent exemplars. They must remember that in education, as in every vocation, even the practical view is best represented by the practitioner. They must learn to welcome the unofficial, nay even, as not a few institutions are now doing, the official and formal cooperation of faculty representatives in every question of university policy. They must learn to insist not alone on the obligations, but on the rights of the instructors, and must be prepared to defend them against the unfounded clamor of public sentiment and of private interest. In proportion as they will learn these truths, and will come to realize that they are trustees not merely for the material progress of the institution, but primarily for the perpetuation of the university ideal, just in that measure will they make themselves indispensable and beneficent.

In social life nothing lasting has ever been achieved without whole-hearted cooperation. We all—trustees, president, faculties and students—must learn to emphasize our duties rather than our rights; only thru a self-sacrificing readiness to perform our mutual obligations can we justly insist upon our privileges. The chief obligation that rests upon us all is the recognition of, and de-

votion to, the true university ideal. Each one of us is in some respect in a position of authority toward others. Let us beware how we use this authority. Let us divest ourselves of the false notions that have grown up thru tradition and perversion. Let us realize that in the true university we are all colleagues—teachers and students, deans and instructors, trustees and faculty; and that in a university there is no room for a sacerdotal hierarchy or an educational organization based on political or industrial efficiency. Let us remember that the spirit of the university is a subtle and elusive thing, all the more delicate and frail as it is pregnant of glorious potency. Let us preserve this spirit from the rough touch of blundering interference and of well-meaning but clumsy manipulation. Let us keep alive the tiny spark which is even now visible, and let us endeavor, by careful tending and by unselfish and intelligent devotion, to fan it into the flame of the real university spirit which will take off the chill of educational ineptitude and which will illumine, for all time, the path of intellectual development and of permanent social progress.

EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN

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